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## Psychoanalyst's Values and Countertransference

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„I pray God that he may rid me of God“  
(Meister Eckhart)

### Introduction

Countertransference, though only since the late 40's, is one of the most tormented concepts in the history of psychoanalysis because it directly concerns the analyst's ability to analyze. The literature on the subject demonstrates that countertransference is defined differently by different authors since in this field, perhaps more than in others, „analysts of different persuasions use the same words to convey widely different meanings“ (1:281). But analysts' values and philosophical and scientific convictions carry even more weight than differences in language with regard to countertransference concepts and the analytic relationship. My main assumption is that the technique adopted by psychoanalysts derives from their values and the general theory of human beings to which, consciously or unconsciously, they subscribe.

My standpoint comes from Erich Fromm's conception of radical humanism and its consequences on the plane of analytic technique. Humanistic and non-humanistic values, real values and illusory values, are interwoven in the analytic work, above all in its unconscious aspects. So the analyst must be aware not only of the clinical consequences of his conscious beliefs but also of the possible operation therein of ra-

tionalizations which conceal underlying unconscious beliefs.

### Radical Humanism: Real Values and Illusory Values

Values and theories are very closely related. Values require that theories be developed coherently, and theories take on values in their premises, sometimes only in implicit ways. Radical humanism's value orientation is to see the root of everything in man. It sets out from the presupposition that human nature exists as a characteristic of the human species, common to all human beings, who not only have a similar anatomy and physiology but also the same psychic structure. This makes the human race a unity and explains the comprehensibility of even the most distant cultures, their art, their myths, their dramas (2:55). It is a theoretic vision which finds its clinical application mainly in the „center-to-center“ correlation between analyst and patient (3,4): the analyst can understand the patient to the extent that he himself experiences what the patient experiences, in accordance with Terence's maxim: *Nihil humani a me alienum puto* (Nothing human is alien to me) (5:52). Every individual, as a member of the human race, is potentially capable of experiencing every human experience.

Many humanistic principles are fundamental to the constitutions of western nations and are



furthermore put forward by the most important and widespread religions. Schoolteachers teach human values to children and adolescents. But the fact is that in our societies different values prevail, based on money, power and success, which are at the base of the economic functioning. „Social character“ orientations (6) are influenced by these powerful non-humanistic situations which tend to become the actual values, while the great ideal principles either remain illusory values (7:325-29) or are even openly disparaged. These two series of values, humanistic and non humanistic, are in themselves conscious, but the rationalizations which make illusory values pass for real values are unconscious, as are the consequences of these mechanisms in the individual psyche.

The most widespread character orientation in western society today is the „marketing“ one. To understand its essence we may refer to Marx's distinction between the „use value“ and „exchange value“ of goods. The former is given by the concrete utility of the item, the latter by its price. The „personality market“ turns people into goods in the sense that it splits off their exchange value (image, professional skill, ability to adapt) from their use value which is given by non-commercial qualities: tenderness, love of justice, love of truth, love of freedom, capacity to love, willingness to share what they have etc., qualities which the labor market either ignores or does not welcome. One loses the experience of one's own identity. „I am as you desire me“. The emptiness inside is functional to rapid and offhand role changes (6:46-7). The „separation from reason and heart is almost complete“. Furthermore, the growing development of technologies, especially in the computer field, encourages an unconscious and idolatric „cybernetic religion“. „Cybernetic man“ thinks but does not feel. Intellect is increasingly dissociated from feelings and emotions. People believe they are feeling whereas they are in fact thinking about a feeling, they believe they are moved whereas they are in fact thinking of an emotion. The ability to feel becomes an illusory value, while the modern gods of detachment and calculation are real values.

In the „marketing“ character orientation, splitting mechanisms operate which are due to

the functioning requirements of society and its economy. They act in a diffuse manner and press powerfully on the mind without the person being aware of them.

Psychoanalysis may bring to light even the subtlest infiltrations of non-humanistic values into the mind, and this is part of the analyst's formative training. But even in a well analyzed mind we may say that there is sadistic-moral, sadistic-anal and narcissistic content linked to power, money and success which is very difficult to eradicate. We are dealing with content that enters actively into countertransference.

### The „Idologic“ View of Transference and Countertransference

The idol concept comes from the fact that human beings transfer their faculties and strengths to external figures, real or imaginary. We are dealing with human constructions, material or mental, to which individuals unconsciously attribute parts of themselves and then subjugate themselves to their own projections. The idol functions as an alienated and illusory manifestation of human powers.

Fromm puts the question of whether transference is only a repetition of infantile experiences or also of „mobilization of the 'idolatric passion'“ (8:45). He points out (8) that his ideas should be understood as an extension of Freud's, without polemical intent. Faced with the difficulties along the road towards individuation, the human being may feel himself pushed in a regressive direction by the yearning for an omnipotent figure he can trust and subject himself to. The transference phenomenon reveals the type of survival strategy a person adopts and the type of idol he turns to. Analyzing the transference of that person is like observing his relationship with the world through a microscope (9). In Fromm there is a value judgment on the transference phenomenon inasmuch as he considers (8) the need for idols pathological. Kohut expresses quite a different opinion, according to which the need for relationships with „selfobjects“ may be healthy (10).

The analytical index of Fromm's complete works, edited by R. Funk, contains no reference



to „countertransference“. This is a significant fact with an implicit value judgment. If by countertransference we mean the analyst’s transference to the person being analyzed, we may believe that for Fromm this too is due to „idolatric passions“ (11). At the long clinical seminar held in Mexico City in 1968, Fromm in fact affirmed that countertransference is a „counterattitude“. I link this at once with the phrase „blind spot“ used by Freud (12:329).

„... every unresolved repression in the physician constitutes what W. Stekel has well named a ‘blind spot’ in his capacity for analytic perception“. But a few lines earlier Freud says: „... he (the analyst) must bend his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the emerging unconscious of the patient, be as the receiver of the telephone to the disc“ (12:328).

And one year later he expressed this idea again:

„It is not without good reason... that I have maintained that every man possesses in his unconscious an instrument by which he can interpret the expressions of the unconscious of another“ (13:125).

Fromm does not deal with countertransference, but he shows himself to be continuously interested in the global communication between analyst and the person being analyzed, in which the analyst puts himself forward as a human being specially trained in „the art of listening“ (14). Fromm places the greatest emphasis on the value of the analytic dialogue: „Now I listen to you, and while I’m listening, I have responses which are the responses of a trained *instrument* (...) I’ll tell you what I hear (...) Then you tell me how you feel about my interpretation“. (15:35) (my italics).

Although Fromm is not explicit on this point (1), I believe that in his conception of analytic listening we can see a development of the Freudian phrases „receptive organ“ and „instrument“, referring to the analyst’s unconscious. The concept of countertransference in Fromm appears very narrow. In such a strict sense countertransfer-

ence is seen in the classic manner of the first analysts (16,17) as an intrusion into analysis of non-analyzed residues of the psychoanalyst’s own pathology. There was a strong reaction against this conception of countertransference and in favor of its creative and therapeutic use in analysis, starting with Paula Heimann’s (18) famous 1950 article „On Countertransference“ in which however the proposals for clinical use of countertransference set out from her much broader concept.

My interpretation of Fromm proposes, on the theoretical plane, breaking down the analyst’s global reaction into two components which in fact, in experience, tend to overlap and interweave: the countertransference distortions component and that of empathic listening and objective vision. This sets very tough problems. We need to give a precise meaning and a theoretical basis to the claim of objectivity. Also taking into account the distinction between „exactness“ and „truth“ put forward by Horkheimer (19:38), the former referable to natural science and the latter pertaining to inquiry into the human being, whatever definition of objectivity is supplied, it lends itself to being accused of its opposite, that is, of ideology, of distortion, of partiality, depending on the point of view assumed. It is an objection that cannot be eluded on the logical plane. This notwithstanding, it seems to me necessary to declare a choice of values and to draw both the theoretical and practical consequences in the best way. Others have the right to say that this choice is ideological. Besides, I believe that epistemological peace on themes like these is not possible, and perhaps not even to be wished for. The choice of value which in my opinion may claim to put itself forward as human objectivity is that of humanism. This is the choice made by Fromm who traces an ideal line through history which touches various „masters“ of humanity, from Isaiah to Socrates, from Meister Eckhart to Spinoza, from Goethe to Albert Schweitzer. It may be objected that these „masters“ did not say the same things. Certainly they did not say exactly the same things, but each spoke with his own voice of interest in the human being, of the truths concerning the human condition. Human truths are alive, they palpitate and, though re-



maining the same, are expressed in as many different modulations as there are individuals in a state of being and becoming. There is a humanistic corridor in history, a corridor thousands of years long in which the human faculty of objectivity and love of truth in dialogue have been practiced. This idea of objectivity is conceived and experienced as a human function in operation, an interior faculty in action, far more thinking thought than thought thought.

### Aspects of Communication in the Analytic Relationship

Towards the end of his life Freud wrote of the analytic relationship in very lofty terms:

„... we must not forget that the relationship between analyst and patient is based on a love of truth, that is, on the acknowledgment of reality, and that it precludes any kind of sham or deception“ (20:351-52).

Fromm too was old when he observed:

„The essential factor in psychoanalytic therapy is ... (the) enlivening quality of the therapist. No amount of psychoanalytic interpretation will have an effect if the therapeutic atmosphere is heavy, unalive and boring“ (21:296).

It seems to me that the two propositions above already posit the terms of Hirsch's 1987 (22) restatement which indicates two fundamental therapeutic factors: insight and the experience of a new type of human relationship between analyst and patient. In the classic vision the former factor prevails, while Fromm insists that the latter be recognized as not only important but even indispensable to the very subsistence of the former. It is my opinion that in this way Fromm anticipates the problem of „When interpretation fails“ (23). The analyst must know how to create an intense and vital climate in the session, and the patient must feel that the analyst feels (9).

Reflecting on Sullivan's conception of the analyst as „participant observer“, Fromm goes on to affirm: (...) to 'participate' is still to be

outside. The knowledge of another person requires being inside of him, to be him“ (3:332).

As for insight, Fromm (3:349) gives a precious, precise definition: „It is a characteristic of all true insight in psychoanalysis that it cannot be formulated in thought“. Fromm also expresses analogous positions when he takes the example of the taste of Rhine wine (24) which cannot be understood from a description in words but only by drinking it. Brought into the analytic relationship the wine metaphor suggests an idea of insight as a pre-discursive event in which the intellect does not play a leading role. These convictions in the clinical field are coherent with the theory of social „filters“ which select the psychic content coming into consciousness. In Fromm's opinion (3,2) a great deal of individual and collective human experience remains unconscious because it is held back by socially imposed filters. A determining filtering function is carried out by language, as well as by logic and by the selection of non- taboo mental content to be admitted to consciousness. A vocabulary may not include words for certain experiences yet have a rich range for others.

It is also worthwhile recalling some of Groddeck's reflections on language. He states that the deepest internal life is mute and that verbal language lies when trying to express it because it is impossible to render the incessant movement of lived experiences in all their changing modalities. Verbal language on the one hand seems indispensable to human communication, but on the other hand it „gags“ thought. When we want to communicate deep, fine and delicate content we must employ gesture, physical and eye contact and non-verbal, musical sound (25). Groddeck believes, with Fromm, that psychic content precedes the word. This conviction has consequences on the plane of analytic technique, among which a reappraisal of the role of interpretation and an exploitation of empathic components in the idea of a global dialogue between analyst and patient.

Fromm (9) states that in the session the analysand must be seen in the totality of his state of being at that moment. The totality includes the body, and in the „here and now“ relationship the analyst and the analysand are there with their bodies. We learn from Groddeck that the



unity of body and psyche is continuously reproduced by means of symbols through which the happenings of the body become psychic and the happenings of the psyche become physical (26,27). I believe that the analyst's empathy leads to feeling the patient's affects when he or she complains about his/her body and to placing attention on the body when the complaint concerns moral pain.

### Analytic Relationship and Convictions on Human Nature

I think that in Fromm's clinical thought there is a implicit distinction between countertransference and the analyst's humanistic, non-distorting reaction to what the patient expresses. While this second reaction is a property of the analyst's ability and competence in center-to-center relatedness and therefore, it seems to me, constitutes in the most appropriate way Freud's „receptive organ“ and „instrument“, countertransference represents a limitation on the analyst's part (9). Fromm states that the analyst must offer himself on two planes: on the transference plane of the patient who invests him with his distortions and needs, and on the plane of the real person addressing himself to the real person in front of him (15). Hoffman (28) defined positions of this type as „conservative critiques“ (of the „blank screen“ concept), while „radical critiques reject the dichotomy between transference as distortion and non- transference as reality based“ (28:393). But here it is actually a question of values and a general concept of human nature inasmuch as he states (28:394): „The radical critic is a relativist“. This gives further confirmation that concepts of countertransference and the analytic relationship depend on the underlying implicit or explicit theory of the human being.

In the social-constructivist view human nature is not universal but relative, local. Since it is not possible to separate human beings from their culture and history and study them outside the context of their life, nor is it possible to form universal laws on human nature (29). So it may be coherently maintained that historical and cultural relativities can in no way be reducible to a

human common denominator, as if it were impossible to refer to a general human „we“, a human species „we“ (30). A valid objection to these affirmations, it seems to me, is that every human group recognizes a transcultural humanity in the other groups (31): a recognition that is not so much intellectual as experiential. And we may say with Fromm (2:120): „Man is not only a member of society, but he is also a member of the human race“. The social-constructivists are very acute in their analyses and their radical criticism of theories, but I don't believe they could invalidate a proposition like this one of Fromm's:

„Man is not a blank sheet of paper on which culture can write its text; he is an entity charged with energy and structured in specific ways, which, while adapting itself, reacts in specific and ascertainable ways to external conditions“ (6:19).

Humankind expresses itself through its cultures, which differ in their myths, religions, arts, languages and material ways of living, and it also expresses itself in individuals' capacity for reaction to the enormous pressures that culture exerts upon them. This capacity for reaction takes its strength from the fact that each individual is a member not only of his own society but also of humankind. The question of the individual's twofold belonging, that is, belonging to both the human race and to a specific culture, is a question that has been long debated and on which neo- enlightenment and neo-romanticism continue to clash. The former emphasizes the universal aspect of the human being while the latter insists on his ineradicable roots of culture, religion, ethnic group, traditions, language etc.. The enlightened viewpoint, reminding the human being of his universality, releases him from the confines of particular cultures and closed ethnocentric visions, liberating him as a world citizen. Being a world citizen corresponds to the humanist ideal of not repressing and dissociating in oneself anything that is human, that is to say, making the unconscious conscious, experiencing one's own human universality over and above one's own original culture (2).

In Fromm's opinion the unconscious in-



cludes the totality of human potentialities. The conscious part of the individual psyche is largely a social datum, it is prevalently an illusion, shared and produced collectively. The universal human components, the biological, psychic and spiritual wholeness of man, „rooted in the Cosmos“, remain unconscious. In man, unawareness represents the plant, the animal, the spirit. In whatever culture, „man ... has all the potentialities; he is the archaic man, the beast of prey, the cannibal, the idolater, and he is the being with the capacity for reason, for love, for justice“ (13:328). The „whole man“, from the most distant past to the potential future, remains unconscious, but I think that analysis, at least in principle, can build bridges between experience of oneself as a member of a given society and experience of oneself as a part of humankind.

### **Humanistic Values and Their Influence on Listening**

I assume here that the analyst's humanistic values are real and not the product of rationalizations. Fromm (9) states that the analyst can experience what the patient is experiencing, can place himself in the center of the other and thus see, as a functioning whole, the totality of what the patient lives, the internal movement that expresses the external manifestations, in such a way as „to see a person as the hero of a drama, of a Shakespearean drama, or a Greek drama, or of a Balzac novel“ (32:26). Given Fromm's „humanistic premise“, if the patient is by temperament and/or character a very different type of person than the analyst, the latter can understand the former because everything is within him/her, as everything is with in every human being.

„What I mean is, everything is in us - there is no experience of another human being has which is not also an experience which we are capable of having“ (32:20). Or again: „I find the Eichmann in myself. I find everything in myself, I find also the saint in myself, if you please“ (14:101).

We should however take other aspects into account which can complicate the analyst's approach and obfuscate the „idologic“ view of

countertransference. Radical humanism may be a choice based more on ethical than on cognitive, gnosiological reasons. In any case we are dealing with a vision in which the ethical component is very strong and tends to inspire the analyst's conduct of life. We must be highly aware that such an approach influences even the finest and most skilled listening. In spite of the analyst's intentions, a kind of personal filter of humanistic weft may be formed within him/her, constructed of implicit interpretations, prior and unconscious. The function of a filter is to discard a given content which another type of filter, a non-humanistic one, would collect. That is, a sort of distorting idol can somehow be created, the obstinacy of an assumption, precisely where we would not think it could arise. This is not an invitation to a relativist vision but rather to vigilance and to the necessary and continuous dialectic effort of maintaining our theories in relationship with the expressions of the unconscious.

An open theoretic system is needed, aimed more at understanding than interpreting, which proceeds by readings that are never definitive, in such a way as to grasp a person's symbols and enigmatic communications and let them speak without enclosing them in a predefined scheme. But at the same time the patient's unconscious must not be made absolute, seen as the source of revealed truths. Its products should be compared with the firm points of our theoretic scheme so that our critical spirit can operate on both sides: that of the patient who expresses himself, and that of our overall apparatus of listening and understanding.

Moreover, the affirmation of values is not immediately reconcilable with the principle that the analyst should not judge the person under analysis. In fact this principle is itself a value and represents a dichotomy with regard to the analyst putting forward values. I think this irreconcilability may be seen as tension between two opposing poles which the analyst must try to correlate within himself/herself.

### **Non Humanistic Values in Countertransference**

As examples of non-humanistic values operating in countertransference I shall limit myself here to



the examination of two possible consequences of a still latent unconscious need for sadistic power in an analyst who nonetheless professes humanistic values.

Greenberg and Mitchell (33:368) state that Kohut „avoids the covert ‘developmental morality’ inherent in all other psychodynamic theories“. For Fromm, on the contrary, as reported by Lesser (34:493) „the primary goal of psychoanalysis was to enable the patient to become individuated and autonomous, with the courage to transcend irrational, constricting cultural values“. Now, in itself „developmental morality“ would be a humanistic value, but if the psychoanalyst aims to achieve it through the analytic work it may happen that the countertransference contains an unconscious moral sadism which can transform the idea of that value into the rationalization of a narcissistic wound inflicted on the patient.

A second field of action of the analyst’s moral sadism may concern problems intrinsic to language, the frequent intimate equivocalness of terms, syntactic structures and rhetorical figures. Notwithstanding the difficulties, when one wants to understand, in the end one often understands, but the linguistic problem may be exploited. Diplomatic language is an example of conscious exploitation of the problem. It may come about that sadistic components of countertransference lead the analyst to take advantage, unconsciously but no less ably or subtly as a result of this, of the ambiguity of the word and also of the voice which utters it.

### Concluding Remarks

With his concept of transference Fromm reveals his complexity as an intellectual embodying a singular crossroads of ideas. He introduces into twentieth century culture the lines of force of the great „masters“ of humanism and offers them to psychoanalysis as terrain for comparison, entreaty and verification. On the one hand transference is seen as a response to the *conditio humana*, susceptible to inquiry by psychoanalysis, and on the other, inasmuch as it is alienation, is seen in terms of idolatry (35) which has always been refuted by humanistic consciences.

Formulation of the theory of transference in „idological“ terms is a possible critical response of psychoanalysis to the current growing idolatric phenomena that characterize human and political society.

In a humanistic and „idologic“ vision of transference, the analyst reacts with emotivity and expresses his reactions to everything the person in analysis expresses, and not only with regard to transference. If the analyst’s reaction to the patient’s transference is not countertransferential, that is to say idolatric, but humanistic, aimed at highlighting the distortion and rendering it conscious to the patient with view to analyzing the transference, the analyst carries out his/her duty, which is that of being the patient while remaining himself/herself (9). If on the other hand the analyst reacts in countertransferential terms, also distorting himself/herself, projecting his/her own content onto the patient, then the analyst loses his competence and leaves the field to his „counterattitude“ to analysis. Furthermore, counterattitude to analysis may concern not only the aspect of the analyst’s response but also that of listening, when it is influenced and even distorted by a stiff, unconscious interpretative filter.

Given the „humanistic premise“, we cannot but posit the distinction between countertransference and the analyst’s humanistic reaction. There are reasons of principle that originate from the human alienation theme which, for Fromm (35), coincides with that of idolatry. It is true that the distinction appears clearer on the intellectual plane, as a concept, than as an experience in the „here and now“ of the session, since it is not always possible for the analyst to understand the nature of his reaction while he is living it. But this is a clinical problem which I feel does not demonstrate the lack of basis and useful function of the distinction between transference plane and reality plane, between distortion and objectivity, a distinction which belongs to living and relating. In a humanistic vision, human history, like that of a given individual, appears like an interwoven flow of the two aspects. Even in the darkest periods of history, objectivity free of idolatry speaks and speaks again, with different words and concepts, of the same themes of respect for life, of love and reason



and of keeping in touch with reality.

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